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ABSTRACT

Each school's version of a partnership with parents is unique, and no generic model exists. Designated in 1988 as one of 14 model schools in the New Jersey State Department of Education "Parents as Partners in Learning" project, the Mildred Magowan school in Edgewater Park has followed a systematic approach that has consistently led to increased involvement of parents in their young children's education. Though historically Magowan had welcomed parents in traditional ways, an 8-step program for expanding parental participation was introduced in 1980. Currently, a 22-step continuum is utilized. Each step in the continuum represents a higher level of parental involvement than the previous step. These steps include parents': (1) attending promotion exercises; (2) attending classroom plays and presentations; (3) sponsoring curriculum-related and family-oriented activities; (4) participating on committees that influence school curricula and policies; (5) making presentations on their areas of expertise; (6) practicing vocabulary and number facts with children in the classroom; and (7) assisting in classroom learning activities after being trained by the teacher. Since the implementation of this model, the number of involved parents has increased gradually, with a higher percentage of parents each year, compared to the previous year, volunteering at the highest level of involvement. Parents and teachers concur that their collaboration has enriched Magowan students' learning. Contains 16 references. (HTH)

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Increasing Parental Involvement in the Primary Grades: The Magowan School Model

By Harlene Galen

Introduction

Research findings during the last twenty-five years have confirmed the benefits of parents' involvement in their young children's education. Evidence continues to mount regarding the direct relationship between parents' participation and their sons and daughters' achievement in school. (Bloom, 1964; Coleman, 1966, 1991; Comer, 1980, 1987, 1988; Davies, 1989, Epstein and Dauber, 1989; Goodson, Swartz, and Millsap, 1991; Greenberg, 1989; Henderson, 1981, 1987; Rich, 1985; Weiss, 1990.) Nevertheless, in the United States, parental participation, even when it existed in a pre-school setting, often wanes when children enter kindergarten or the primary grades, especially in a public school setting. Consequently, increasing mothers' and fathers' involvement in these early grades is a goal toward which public school educators of young children frequently aspire.

No generic model for a partnership with parents exists. Each school's version is somewhat unique. Its composition is determined by factors such as the individual school's leadership, socio-economic levels and ethnicity, finances, philosophy and priorities,

and the willingness of both staff and parents to change, collaborate, communicate, share decision-making, and take part in training. However, information about a specific systematic approach which has lead consistently to increased involvement of parents in their young children's school may assist other educators in expanding parental involvement in their own settings.

An Example of One School That Followed a Systematic Approach

In July 1988 Mildred Magowan School in Edgewater Park, New Jersey, was one of fourteen schools statewide to be designated as a model school in the N. J. State Department of Education project, "Parents as Partners in Learning". (NJ Department of Education, 1988). The model was also chosen by the National School Boards Association for presentation at its 1989 annual convention where it was selected for audiotaping. (National School Boards Association, 1989) Currently the model continues to ensure an environment at Magowan in which mothers and fathers are valued participants in the education of their children.

Characteristics of the Community and School District

Edgewater Park is a primarily residential township in Burlington County, New Jersey, approximately 20 miles south of the state capital, Trenton, and 20 miles north of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It is bordered on the east by a major six lane

highway and on the west by the Delaware River. The township covers 2.8 square miles , one-third of which is still either farmland or undeveloped land. Its population of approximately 9300 ranges from low middle to upper economic levels. Housing includes single family dwellings as well as six apartment/condominium buildings.

The district has three schools--Jacques, Magowan, and Ridgway. Jacques accomodates Magowan's fourth grades, preschool handicapped programs, transitional multiple handicapped programs, the before and after school child care program, the preschool community education program, and administrative and child study team offices. Magowan, total enrollment of 540, houses grades K-3 and a half dozen special education classes; Ridgway, 390 pupils in grades 5-8. Pupils in grades 9-12 attend Burlington City High School on a tuition basis.

Magowan is an integrated school with approximately 25% of its population representing minorities. It has an active English as a Second language program. Children live in a variety of family constellations including single-parent, two parent, blended families, grandparent-headed households. The number of pupils coming from the six apartment/condominium units has increased dramatically within the last seven years. The majority of pupils have a parent/guardian who works outside the home at least part-time.

Original Magowan Parental Involvement

Historically, Magowan had welcomed parents in traditional ways. Parents assisted in the library and on class trips. They were invited to "Back-to-School Night" and to observe in classrooms during American Education Week. Parent/teacher conferences were held after report card distribution. Pupils performed for their parents at assembly programs, seasonal music concerts, and Field Day. A "Parents' Handbook" was sent home at the beginning of each school year. Teachers requested parents'signatures on corrected papers.

Expanded Parent Participation--An Eight-step Procedure

Twelve years ago, an eight-step procedure for expanded parental participation was introduced. It has been refined over time with emphasis being placed on crucial elements for success at each step:

1. The principal and other district administrators analyzed the school's needs.

   Crucial Element: The district's Superintendent of Schools secured Board of Education support.

2. A committee of teachers, concerned parents, and the principal identified which of the needs might be addressed by parent/staff collaboration.

   Crucial Element: Parent participation in the planning phase translated into their vested interest in implementation.

3. A gradual increase of parental involvement was outlined. (This evolved into a continuum of parental involvement which is regularly modified to reflect current growth of the parent/teacher partnership. See figure 1 below.)
   Crucial Element: Targeted initially was one area where parents would benefit personally from involvement. We chose instruction in the operation of Commodore computers in our computer lab. Remember that in 1980 personal computers had recently joined the technology scene.
4. The committee ascertained what training was needed for both parents and teachers to make the partnership successful. The principal followed through on the provision of training.
   Crucial Element: One individual accepted the responsibility for monitoring training.
5. A concerted effort was made to spread the word about the benefits of parental involvement to parents, children, and staff.
   Crucial Elements: Emphasis to parents was on the value of participation, instead of on its frequency. Any amount of time, even a single short classroom visit was appreciated

because it gave their children the message that school was important to Mom and/or Dad.

Patience with staff's participation was exercised. Teachers who felt comfortable with more intensive parent inclusion started the trend, believing that colleagues would eventually join in.

6. Through brainstorming the committee generated ideas for increasing involvement of parents unable to come to the school. Several ideas were chosen for implementation.

   Crucial Element: Selected ideas were simple and practical.

7. Ways to consistently reinforce appreciation by the principal to the staff and parents and by teachers to parents were discussed. Some were selected and begun.

   Crucial Element: Verbal and written acknowledgement, informal and formal recognition were utilized.

8. A decision was reached to make evaluation of the program by both parents and faculty an ongoing activity.

   Crucial Element: Suggestions for changes and modifications were respected as means for strengthening the program.

Current Magowan Parental Involvement

In existence today is a twenty-two step Parental Involvement Continuum which contains a blend of original steps with new steps reflective of modifications and suggestions advocated by mothers, fathers, and school staff. (See Figure 1 below.) The continuum begins with what the Magowan school community has defined as its entry level, "Number 1 - Parents send children to school on a regular basis." The additional steps specify our estimation of an ascending order of parental involvement. Representative examples include the following:

Number 8 -"Parents attend competitive games, athletic events at school." Parents cheering their sons and daughters on at Field Day each Spring is a common sight. Within the last six years the games for this event have gradually changed from competitive games to cooperative games where teams of children work together and ribbons are awarded to every child who takes part in a team event , not just to an individual winner.

Number 10 -"Parents attend classroom plays, presentations". Often grandparents and younger siblings join in, too.

Number 13-"Parents participate as room mothers or room fathers" One of the responsibilities that room parents enjoy is planning and assisting in holiday celebrations.

Number 14-"Parents assist in the school library." Sometimes a particular child is lucky enough to have both his/her mother and father help in the library at the same time.

Number 15 -"Under the direction of teachers, parents make instructional materials for classroom use." The Board of Education has granted kindergarten teachers half-day release time five times during the school year to provide inservice for parents. Teachers explain the concepts to be taught and show the parents how children's use of manipulatives helps them understand these concepts. Parents and teachers together make the manipulatives which are ultimately used in the kindergarten centers for concept reinforcement.

Number 16 - "P. T. A. and other parents work on sponsorship and implementation of curriculum-related and family-oriented activities." Directly related to the curriculum is the biannual P.T.A. Cultural Arts event where children's writing and artistic talents are recognized. Reading is Fundamental (R.I.F.), jointly funded by the U. S. Federal government, the Edgewater Park Board of Education, and the Edgewater Park P.T.A. provides all Magowan students with their choices of free books to keep. Distribution takes

place three times a year. Parents help with the planning and assist the children in choosing their books. Family Fun Night is held every two or three years to encourage parents to join their children in playing enjoyable games. No monetary fee is charged. Admission to a child is allowed only if s/he is accompanied by a parent.

Number 17 -"Parents participate on committees which directly influence school curricula and policies. Committees consist of parents, teachers, administrator(s), and occasionally students." A recent example was parents' involvement on the district's family life curriculum committee where the focus was on augmenting the in-school substance abuse prevention program. Since one of the most influential factors in off-setting such abuse is the nuturing of a young child's self-concept, the committee planned and presented an evening panel program on "Attention and Peer Relation Skills for Home and School". Panelists were two psychologists and a pediatrician who specialize in helping young children who are very active, find concentrating difficult, or have trouble in relating to other children.

Number 18- Parents, in the classroom, either make presentations or give an informative hands-on session on areas of expertise." Illustrative are a demonstration of flower arranging by a mother who is a florist and a hands-on experience in operating a voting machine by a grandfather who was manning the polls on a recent primary election day. (The school gym and auditorium serve as voting places during the time school is in session.)

Number 20 -"Parents, in the classroom, practice with children on vocabulary words, number facts; listen to children read." Many fathers volunteer in this area. Pupils, especially those who live in a single parent family headed by a working mother, thoroughly enjoy the dads' attention.

Number 21 -"Parents, trained by teacher, assist in classroom in such learning activities as conferencing on writing samples, facilitating at learning centers, helping with computer use." Occasionally, not only parents of children but also parents of teachers assist. Children benefit from this grandparenting, especially if their own grandparents visit infrequently or are deceased.

FIGURE I - MAGOWAN SCHOOL PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT CONTINUUM, 1992-93

Key: The higher the number, the higher the level of involvement

Level #	Description
One	Parents send children to school on a regular basis.
Two	Parents read school's handbook for parents.
Three	Parents join P.T.A.
Four	Parents are involved in P.T.A. fund-raising activities.
Five	Parents help children with homework.
Six	Parents attend parent/teacher conferences.
Seven	Parents attend promotion exercises.
Eight	Parents attend competitive games, athletic events at school.
Nine	Parents attend school assembly programs.
Ten	Parents attend classroom plays, presentations.
Eleven	Parents visit classrooms during American Education Week or Back-to-School Night.
Twelve	Parents supervise on class trips or chaperone at school functions.
Thirteen	Parents participate as room mothers or room fathers.
Fourteen	Parents assist in school library.
Fifteen	Under the direction of teachers, parents make instructional materials for classroom use.
Sixteen	Parents work on sponsorship and implementation of curriculum-related and family-oriented activities.
Seventeen	Parents participate on committees which directly influence school curricula and policies. Committees consist of parents, teachers, administrator(s), and occasionally students.
Eighteen	Parents, in the classroom, either make presentations or give an informative hands-on session in areas of expertise.
Nineteen	Parents read to children in the classroom.
Twenty	Parents, in the classroom, practice with children on vocabulary words, number facts; listen to children read.
Twenty-one	Parents, in the classroom, reinforce processes/ concepts introduced by teachers.
Twenty-two	Parents, trained by teacher, assist in classroom in such learning activities as conferencing on writing samples, facilitating at learning centers, helping with computer use.

Synopsis of Continued Growth

Since the implementation of the Magowan model the number of involved parents has increased gradually with a higher percentage each year volunteering at the highest levels as delineated by the Parental Involvement Continuum (See Figure 1.) Consistently throughout each of the last six years (1986-1992) 130 to 180 parents have helped in the school. The 1991-92 session, as had the previous three school years, recorded an increase in the number of fathers helping in the classroom.

Parental assistance in classrooms, initially limited to a few classes, has grown steadily because teachers have endorsed both its benefits to students and its impact upon the community's understanding of the challenges today's educators face. Of course, care has been taken to provide helping mothers and fathers with definitive training which confirms their roles as reinforcers of the lessons provided by the teacher.

Mothers, fathers, and teachers concur that their collaboration has enriched Magowan students' learning. They have proven repeatedly that a systematic approach, carried out with sensitivity and caring for others, is the key for a successful parent/teacher partnership.

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